

## AFRICA AND THE MDGs

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GPS1/17

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At the turn of the millennium, world leaders and experts in a broad range of fields agreed on an ambitious programme to reduce poverty and promote development worldwide. The programme took shape under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), and was named the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The eight goals – supported by 21 quantifiable targets and 60 indicators through which progress could be measured – were considered to be globally achievable targets by 2015. The goals are to (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (2) achieve universal primary education, (3) promote gender equality and empower women, (4) reduce child mortality rate, (5) improve maternal health, (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, (7) ensure environmental sustainability, and (8) develop a global partnership for development.

Progress so far has been monitored in various ways, the most recent being the September 2010 Review Summit at the UN Headquarters in New York. Some regions did better than others, notably strong-growth countries like China and India. Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, however, are unlikely to meet the MDGs (Groenewald, 2010).

This paper will explore some of the challenges and opportunities for Africa. Concrete proposals to enable the continent to achieve the MDGs are contained in an addendum at the end.

### **Physical resources**

The fact that Africa trails on nearly every MDG indicator is at odds with the new wave of optimism sweeping across Africa as economic growth rates climb steadily. Mark Swilling (2010) points out that the continent's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased by 4.9% per year since 2000, more than twice what it was in the 1980s and 1990s. However, as was indicated at a meeting of the International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in Stellenbosch in November 2010, Africa cannot escape the resource depletion challenges that face the rest of the world. Real wealth accumulation per capita will not keep up with population growth unless economic growth rates are decoupled from resource depletion rates, and unless resource rents are reinvested in human capital development.

The argument is that if Africa invests in a growth path that is as resource and energy intensive as that followed by the countries of the North, it might end up undermining the key conditions for development that it is dependent on in order to eradicate poverty and rise up on the Human Development Index of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Most countries that have a high rating also have high ecological footprints.

Because it relies heavily on the export of primary natural resources, Africa's growth is related to the worldwide boom in commodities. Resource extraction and export at prevailing global prices undermines

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investments in long-term development infrastructures and human capital, Swilling says. As part of trade liberalisation, African governments were strongly encouraged to lift protective tariffs across the board contrary to the development strategies pursued by the successful Asian tigers.

This leads to the conclusion that if Africa increases exports of primary resources at discounted prices, it will effectively continue to get poorer, which will result in it struggling to build up the financial resources required to invest in the kind of human capital and physical infrastructures it needs to succeed with its development strategies based on poverty eradication.

“The alternative is to invest in human capabilities, technological innovations, infrastructures and renewable natural resources that set up African economies for a long-term sustainable future,” Swilling maintains. The question is, just how far Africa is prepared to go towards the building of rapidly growing green economies? Will current infrastructure development strategies set up African economies to be resource efficient and low-carbon, or will they be built in accordance with the same criteria that have been used to build the unsustainable infrastructures in developed countries?

### **Intellectual resources**

One of the reasons why human capital is in short supply in Africa is that the continent has over decades been experiencing a debilitating brain drain. We continue to lose some of our brightest minds as highly skilled people pursue opportunities for further study or work in more developed parts of the world. This has contributed to Africa’s low output of scientific research, which amounts to only 0.7% of the global total (Nwagwu and Ahmed, 2009). Effectively, Africa is not coming up with enough home-grown solutions of the right kind – innovative and environmentally friendly – to its own developmental challenges.

Part of the problem is that Africa’s rate of higher education participation is too low. Tertiary enrolment is rising faster on the African continent than anywhere else, but the number of students entering higher education is still just 6% of the eligible age group – compared to rates of 70% or more in the North (Teferra and Altbach, 2003).

### **Higher education**

Traditional perspectives in global development have suggested that developing countries should place significant emphasis on primary and secondary education to experience positive economic growth and eliminate pandemic poverty, malnutrition, poor social, health and welfare services, and ineffective governance. At the same time, this assumption held that higher education and centres of excellence in Africa are of lesser importance; a luxury for the privileged few with private benefit that cannot be extrapolated to society as a whole (Botman et al, 2009).

If ever this were true, it definitely no longer is. In the knowledge-based global economy of today, intellectual skill has replaced physical capital in the search for current and future sustained growth (Bloom, Canning et al, 2006). Knowledge has been found to be a chief determinant driving success and growth through its ability to reduce poverty.

The impact of knowledge societies has been so marked it has caused the World Bank to change its policies relevant to higher education in developing countries. Since the turn of the millennium, the World Bank has seen tertiary education as vital to development. Previous policy focused on primary and secondary education but there is now acceptance that the lack of investment in higher education was poorly conceived. The World Bank has recognised the importance of a globalised knowledge economy,

saying that “As knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education ... The quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions, and its availability to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness” (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000; World Bank, 2002).

The Conference of Executive Heads of the Association of Commonwealth Universities met in South Africa in April 2010 to discuss “Universities and the Millennium Development Goals”. Delegates confirmed that higher education has a vital role to play in advancing the MDGs despite the fact that only primary education is included in the goals (ACU, 2010).

Tertiary education produces graduates for the public good, imparts knowledge and produces professionals who then directly and indirectly impact on macroeconomic institutions, the information and telecommunication infrastructure, the national system for innovation and the quality of human resources.

However, graduate attributes also go beyond technical knowledge (Van Schalkwyk et al, 2010). It includes qualities that prepare students to be agents for social good (Bowden et al, 2000). This moves universities past the discourse of the knowledge economy in which higher education is valued for its growth dividend and for building human capital. On the level of values, universities can instil in their students an understanding of and respect for human diversity, heterogeneity and interdependence, which is becoming ever more important in the context of the conflicts thrown up by globalisation (Botman, 2010).

### **Partnerships**

Universities have a key role to play in goal number eight of the MDGs: developing a global partnership for development. Johann Groenewald (2010) argues that a real partnership would entail an association to pursue a common goal, where members all contribute inputs and share both the risks and benefits of the endeavour. This implies an element of trust among the participants in a partnership, without which it would cease to function effectively.

Many international partnership-like associations exist in higher education. There is, however, “an informal yet well-understood academic pecking order in terms of which especially institutions in developing countries would boast of their partnerships with well-known or high ranking institutions in the North,” Groenewald maintains, adding that “in the real world of uneven exchange relationships, scholarships, grants, academic opportunity, honours and credits flow mostly from Northern partners to institutions in the South, who are increasingly in a position of dependency”.

He says it is hard for some to imagine a way out of this vicious circle because the world of higher education is obsessed with rankings, based on indicator systems which favour research intensity or peer rankings of research standing, with little or no attention to teaching and learning effectiveness, student experience, graduate competencies, employability, employer satisfaction, outreach or engagement. A global partnership for development could break this cycle, but only if it is “constituted in fundamentally different ways to prevent a simple reproduction of the status quo”.

Groenewald proposes that African institutions become the “lead agents” in the formation of such partnerships. “This requires a fundamental mind shift on both sides of the North-South divide, namely acceptance of the idea that Africans can take the lead; that they too are valued contributors – not only

recipients – in partnerships; and that they can harness their assets and capabilities in pursuit of a common goal”.

It is the same kind of mind shift that had to take place in South Africa’s hosting of the 2010 Fifa World Cup. The tournament was regarded as an achievement for the continent as a whole because it shattered a number of negative stereotypes about Africa. It changed the way the world looks us, and – more importantly – it changed the way we look at ourselves. We had proven to ourselves that we can achieve success against the odds, and that is why we were able to stand tall on the world stage.

An analogous example in higher education is the Partnership for Africa’s Next Generation of Academics (PANGeA) that was formally constituted in 2010 on African University Day, 12 November (SU News Blog, 2010). Following negotiations going back to 2006, six African universities have banded together in a collaborative network. They are the universities of Botswana, Dar es Salaam, Makerere, Malawi, Nairobi and Stellenbosch. “In this partnership, African institutions of higher education join together to become the lead institutions in the execution of an integrated strategy to develop research capacity, to develop and offer supervision for the pursuit of doctoral studies and advanced research programmes focused on Africa, and eventually to offer joint doctoral degrees,” Groenewald points out.

The first cohort of 31 full-time doctoral students – 22 from African countries other than South Africa – enrolled in the PANGeA-linked Graduate School, of which Groenewald is the project leader, in January 2010. Students and staff are supported by the African Doctoral Academy, which provides training in supervision, research methodology and management to create a pool of supervisors and co-supervisors distributed over partner campuses to enable and encourage student and staff mobility in the context of collaborative research programmes focused on Africa’s problems of development.

### **Hope from and for Africa**

These initiatives form part of Stellenbosch University’s HOPE Project (SU, 2010), which is aimed at deploying the key strengths of higher education – teaching and learning, research and community interaction – to the benefit of society. Also part of this project is Mark Swilling’s TsamaHub, a centre that derives its name from its focus on Transdisciplinarity, Sustainability, Assessment, Modelling and Analysis. The TsamaHub searches for long-term, sustainable solutions to the twin crises of endemic poverty and ecological breakdown, with special reference to Africa’s unique challenges.

The HOPE Project is an example of institutional engagement with the MDGs. The project has five themes that were distilled from, amongst others, the MDGs and South Africa’s Medium-term Strategic Framework. These themes are (1) the eradication of poverty and related conditions, and the promotion of (2) human dignity and health, (3) democracy and human rights, (4) peace and security, as well as (5) a sustainable environment and a competitive industry.

Giving practical expression to these themes are the Graduate School, TsamaHub and 20 other academic initiatives and enabling programmes at Stellenbosch University, ranging from an interdisciplinary food security initiative and a programme for combating poverty, homelessness and socio-economic vulnerability through the legal system, to centres for dispute settlement, HIV/Aids management, agribusiness leadership development and sustainability. It also includes a new rural clinical school to train more doctors for neglected rural areas and a water institute.

**Conclusion**

Developmental programmes – be they the worldwide MDGs or a country programme like South Africa’s MTSF or an institutional initiative like SU’s HOPE Project – can be summarised in terms of their impact on three key areas: people, institutions and the environment. Institutions – be they government structures or civil society bodies, such as universities – play an enabling role. They lay the foundation on which efforts to promote human development and a sustainable environment can be pursued. By continually posing the demand of relevance to institutions, one can ensure that they become and remain purposeful involved in the actual needs of society.

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## **ADDENDUM**

### *Concrete proposals to enable Africa to achieve the MDGs*

1. Keep good governance in focus, politically, commercially and in civil society.
2. Decouple economic growth rates from resource depletion rates.
3. Reinvest resource rents in human capital development.
4. Build green economies by investing in technological innovations, infrastructures and renewable natural resources that set up African economies for a long-term sustainable future that is resource efficient and low-carbon.
5. Mitigate the African brain drain by increasing higher education participation rates and producing more academics and professionals.
6. Use education to produce graduates who can be agents for social by instilling in them an understanding of and respect for human diversity, heterogeneity and interdependence.
7. Stimulate more research, coordinated such that it is focused on African challenges.
8. For Africa to truly benefit from global partnerships in higher education, African institutions must become the lead agents in the formation of such partnerships.
9. Institutions, be they government structures or civil society bodies, should engage with global and local development agendas, and build programmes around strategies in support of the achievement of the MDGs.
10. Build and strengthen a value-driven culture in society, because people live in institutions – be that the family, or schools or churches – and in order to achieve the MDGs, the importance of human dignity needs to form the foundation of everything else.